

# STUDENTS' ENGLISH EXPRESSION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

W. C. Hall\* and L. F. Neal\*\*

## Introduction

Frequent criticisms of university students and of recent graduates are that they cannot write or that they are not articulate speakers. The University of Adelaide decided to investigate thoroughly one of these complaints (the standard of students' written work) and to gather some information on the other.

The University's investigation took place in two stages. In 1973, after an initiative from the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, the University of Adelaide appointed a committee to investigate and report on the standard of English on entry to the University and later, to consider the problem of students for whom English was a second language; and to suggest what action, if any, the University ought to take.

The committee in its report based its findings on replies it received from almost all departments to letters asking for comments on the standard of English and on the examples of students' written work provided by a number of departments.

In 1974 a University-wide survey was conducted to investigate more precisely the nature and the scale of the problems which some students were experiencing with the English language.

As a result of the committee's report and of the survey, four separate approaches to the teaching of "remedial" English have been started in 1976.

## The Committee's Report

The most important and unequivocal conclusion to be drawn from the evidence gathered by the committee was that no department believed that the general standard of competence in English among its students constituted a critically serious problem which actually prevented the teaching of their courses. To the disappointment, so it seemed, of some both inside and without the University, there was no doubt about this. Further, there was no evidence to indicate that there had been a decline in the standard of English during recent years. Again, this finding appeared to disappoint some. Sections of the news media and some members of the University gave the impression that they had expected, and even hoped, that the principal findings would be the reverse of what they were.

\*Director, Advisory Centre for University Education, The University of Adelaide.

\*\*Foundation Professor of Education, The University of Adelaide

Nevertheless, with the exception of one or two departments, notably the foreign language departments, no department was entirely satisfied. There were widespread laments about spelling, punctuation and syntax. More important, perhaps, were the comments that it was not always easy to distinguish between confusion of thought and inadequacy of language. Indeed, the essence of a great many complaints was that some students had little idea of how to formulate what they wanted to say and organise it in a logical structure and that others even had no idea of what an academic essay was meant to be. The committee, in fact, recommended that the University should offer help in essay writing to students who might wish to avail themselves of it.

It was pleasing to note that some departments had instituted essay writing on general topics having nothing to do with the specialism of the department and the examples shown to us were impressive. On the other hand, we were dismayed to learn that in one department no writing was ever required from students other than the ticking of answers to multiple choice questions — and delighted to be told that such a barbaric practice in another department had been discontinued. Three or so years of ticking is to reduce a university education to primitive grunts. It was, however, apparent that in quite a number of departments very little was asked for in the way of written English. And one department reported that the English of their students on entry from the schools was satisfactory but declined thereafter year by year.

With one or two exceptions, departments did not blame the schools for inadequacies in English. On the contrary, there was a ready acceptance by departments of a responsibility for improving the English of their students. The most disturbing comment of all, however, was that in one department the worst English was written by school teachers doing part-time courses. Perhaps that explains why one department could tell us that some schools teach "a silly doctrine that a student should never write 'God exists' but write instead 'It is believed by some people that God exists'." That department went on to say "the second is not a careful version of the first; it is a sociological claim logically independent of the first claim, which is a philosophical one." Examiners of theses will sympathise with this 'cri du coeur'.

Generally speaking, the most common observation was that the standard of English varied, as one department put it 'from the sloppy and unidiomatic to the fluent and pleasing' — and that muddled thinking was as much to blame as linguistic incompetence for such atrocities as "the result has been the formation of those performing active participation in politics to combine their efforts in the form of pressure groups", written not in the examination room but in an essay. Had the committee been able to examine oral proficiency it would be interesting to know what it would have found. The inability of university students when interviewed on television to utter coherent sentences free from a rash of 'you know's' and 'sort of's' is put to shame by many older people, without benefit of university education, who state simply and clearly what they have to say with a Biblical directness.

The committee's report disappointed those who, it appeared to us, hoped that we should declare that the vast majority of students were either semi-literate or worse; that schools had failed lamentably in their work; that there was no health in Adelaide University students. Indeed, one newspaper, for whatever reasons, ascribed to English-speaking students the comments we had made about Asian and migrant students! Standards are, of course, always relative — as was amusingly made clear by a distinguished science professor who dared not answer us by letter lest his English should be bad. In a selected population of some eight to nine thousand, it is statistically almost certain that some will be found wanting. The committee found no evidence, however, to support sensational headlines about illiterate university students. Since few of us would dare to say we had achieved complete mastery of our mother tongue, it is hardly likely that we shall ever be satisfied with our students' English — and that, perhaps, is a very good thing.

Sadly, but hardly unexpectedly, most departments reported that many students whose native language was not English, both Asian students and some migrants, had difficulty in coping with their courses. This clearly was regrettable since several departments also told us that such students were often intelligent and industrious. The committee recommended that the University should provide help for these students.

## The Survey

A questionnaire to be completed by academic staff was produced jointly by the Department of English and the Advisory Centre for University Education. This asked for information on essay writing difficulties (both stylistic and mechanical), difficulties in oral expression (pronunciation and grammar on both formal and informal occasions), difficulty in following lectures and general academic ability.

A student version of the questionnaire was prepared and used by one major department.

One-third of all departments replied to the questionnaire. The following information and conclusions are based on extrapolations made on the basis of questionnaires completed by both staff and students. Table 1 summarises the most important data which were obtained from departments.

Twenty-one students had stylistic difficulties but not mechanical difficulties in writing essays; 6 students had mechanical difficulties but not stylistic difficulties. All other students had both types of difficulty.

For Year 1 only, for each difficulty (D), the following percentages were calculated:

No. of students experiencing D	x 100
Total No. of students experiencing any kind of difficulty	

This was done for replies from both departments and students. The results are shown in Table 2.

Replies from two large departments stated that although they believed there was a problem, they did not know students sufficiently well to be able to complete the questionnaire. Some of the students who completed their questionnaires were attending courses in one of these departments. Other departments which either did not return questionnaires, or which stated they had no problems, also had students attending their courses who returned questionnaires.

A large Arts Faculty department only listed serious cases, but wrote that almost one-half of their students have minor (but not negligible) difficulties, e.g. faulty pronunciation and spelling, and occasional lack of clarity of written expression.

The survey indicated that approximately 138 undergraduate and postgraduate students were experiencing important difficulties with the English language. About one-third of these were first year students (i.e. 2.3% of those new to first year courses). Twenty-one of the total were non-native speakers.

According to figures provided by departments, only a small percentage of those experiencing difficulties were having difficulty with either formal or informal oral expression. This percentage was much higher when based on the students' own estimates of their deficiencies. (The difference is possibly due to the fact that there is little formal assessment of oral expression and so staff are not fully aware of the problem.) The major problems arose in the writing of essays. These problems were both stylistic and mechanical in nature.

**Table 1**  
Summary of Replies to Departmental Questionnaire

Number of students (Total equals 138)	Year 1		45
	Years 2-4		78
	P.G.		15
	Native speaker		117
Number of students with essay writing difficulties	Stylistic	Serious	27
		Causes concern	60
	Mechanical	Serious	12
		Causes concern	60
Numbers with formal oral expression difficulties	Pronunciation		12
	Grammar		3
Numbers with informal oral expression difficulties	Pronunciation		9
	Grammar		6
Academic ability of the 138 students	High		54
	Average		69
	Low		15

Twenty-one students had stylistic difficulties but not mechanical difficulties in writing essays; six students had mechanical difficulties but not stylistic difficulties. All other students had both types of difficulty.

Only one department was able to identify difficulties experienced by students in following lectures or in writing lecture notes. One-half of the students who claimed to be experiencing difficulties with English expression stated that following lectures or writing lecture notes were areas of concern to them. It is clear that the first year students were more critical (and, perhaps, more knowledgeable?) of their deficiencies.

#### Remedial English Classes

As a result of the committee's investigation and survey results, the Committee of Deans formed a sub-committee that decided to conduct four pilot studies during 1976 into the teaching of English expression. Funding for these came from some University departments, the Student Counselling Service, the State's Department of Further Education and the Students' Association. The four studies were labelled

- tutor process
- specific tutoring process
- booklet process
- non-native speakers' tutoring

All four studies were to be administered and evaluated by the Advisory Centre for University Education.

#### Tutor Process

Work by Mr. W. Goodenough at the Torrens College

of Advanced Education had impressed the Committee of Deans sub-committee. (This work is reported in *English in Australia*, No. 33, November, 1975.) Goodenough is a critic of the usual ways of the remedial teaching of writing:

"Why do we wait for the messy, unstructured, ill-spelt, illiterate hotchpotch to come to us before we start to teach about writing? Why start at the wrong end? This approach has been wasteful, inefficient and inhibiting for students. Yet it happens in most subjects. Teachers who themselves can hardly write a Christmas greeting, assess and 'correct' students' writing. Teachers who have little idea how an essay is constructed, set and 'mark' them without questioning whether or not they are competent to do so.

What is true at primary and secondary levels is equally true at tertiary levels, where teachers are usually older and more conservative. How many academics in C.A.E.s and universities write with the 'fundamental clarity and coherence' that Thea Astley requires? How many can separate content from style and 'correctness' from both?"

He has developed a course that demands four hours of teaching, one hour a week for four weeks. It recognises that

"Most things which tertiary teachers regard as 'errors' result from:

- a. a lack of understanding of the subject matter.
- b. lack of ability to structure an essay.

**Table 2**  
Percentage difficulties of Year 1 students experiencing any kind of difficulty.

			PERCENTAGES	
			Dept. replies	Student replies
Students with essay writing difficulties	Native speaker		87	83
	Stylistic	Serious	20	83
		Causes concern	40	44
	Mechanical	Serious	0	22
		Causes concern	27	61
Lecture difficulties			0	50
Students with formal oral expression difficulties	Pronunciation		7	83
	Grammar		7	100
Students with informal oral expression difficulties	Pronunciation		7	66
	Grammar		7	94
Academic ability of the students with difficulties	High		47	11
	Average		40	83
	Low		13	5

- c. attempts by students to use sentence structures which they cannot yet perform in writing, though they can read such structures."

Tutors and lecturers from volunteer departments who normally set, mark and discuss essays are using the Goodenough approach to provide help to those students in their own groups as written expression problems arise. The Departments of Politics, Commerce, Law and English are involved in this. Training sessions have been held for the tutors and a descriptive evaluation (using questionnaires and interviews) is being undertaken.

#### Specific Tutoring

Groups of students (6-10 members per group) are being provided with four hours of tutoring by six part-time tutors who have been trained for that task. All tutorials are being held in the Student Counselling Service and are available to all students. An evaluation similar to that for the Tutor Process investigation is being done.

#### Booklet Process

The Committee of Deans sub-committee examined many of the books on essay writing. It produced a list of recommended texts for students. At the top of the

list came Mitchell, J., 1974, *How to write reports*, Fontana.

Selected students in the Departments of Mathematical Physics, Psychiatry, Politics and Entomology were given the list of recommended books and their opinions on the use of these books are being sought.

#### Non-native Speakers Tutoring

The Department of Further Education through its Migrant Education Centre generously agreed to finance tutorial classes for non-native speakers. Two tutors are being employed for 20 weeks. They are providing a total of 16 hours teaching per week in an attempt to help students to cope with lecture notes, prepare essays and answer examination papers. Once again, a descriptive evaluation of the tutoring is being done.

At the end of 1976 the University should be able to decide whether to make remedial English classes a permanent feature of undergraduate teaching. Already one important fact has emerged: The University of Adelaide is not pretending that teaching problems do not exist but is attempting to overcome them in one important area.